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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TUNIS 000051

SIPDIS

FOR NEA/FO AND NEA/MAG

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [TS](#)

SUBJECT: TUNISIANS WELCOME INAUGURATION OF PRESIDENT OBAMA

REF: A. TUNIS 49

[1](#)B. TUNIS 24

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) Over 200 people attended a reception hosted by the Ambassador to view the inauguration of Barack Obama. Reactions to President Obama's inauguration and speech have been overwhelmingly positive, including in most local media. One Tunisian characterized the President's speech as "genuine" and "without arrogance." There are indications that the GOT, which did not like many of the previous Administration's policies, is interested in a fresh start with President Obama. Embassy will seek to take advantage of this apparent openness by seeking more opportunities for engagement in the coming weeks. End Summary.

A Joyful Crowd Watches the Swearing-In

[1](#)2. (C) Over 200 Tunisians and members of the diplomatic corps attended a January 20 reception at the Ambassador's residence timed to coincide with the swearing in of President Obama, the proceedings of which the group viewed on large screen TVs in French and English. Reactions of Tunisians from all walks of life have been overwhelmingly positive. Participants commented to Embassy Officers that they were "proud" of the United States and that they held high hopes for the Obama Administration. Several commented that they identified with the President's message of "change," with some stating explicitly that they hope to see concrete changes in US foreign policy, especially in the Middle East. One Senator who represents the ruling party acknowledged that the GOT had been keeping the United States "at arm's length," but opined that it was now eager to turn a new page in bilateral relations. Another Parliamentarian expressed the hope that the United States would emphasize diplomacy and outreach under the Obama Administration.

[1](#)3. (C) Retired Ambassador Ahmed Ounaies, a long-time Embassy contact, told Pol/EconCouns that he was as struck by the large number of Tunisian attendees, and the cross section of society they represented, as he was by the enthusiasm and "joy" that they all so clearly shared. Ounaies remarked that he found that the substance and delivery of the President's speech "genuine." While crediting President Obama with articulating a "rational political vision free of demagoguery or arrogance," he made clear that ultimately the Obama Administration will be judged by its actions. Roger Bismuth, a prominent businessman and Senator, shared with the Ambassador his view that the new Administration represents an important opportunity to improve US-Tunisian relations.

[1](#)4. (C) The only complaint EmbOffs heard following the

President's speech came from Zyed Krichen, Editor-in-Chief of independent news weekly magazine Realites, who noted that he was disappointed that the speech contained no direct reference to the Middle East. Krichen acknowledged President Obama's overture to the Islamic world, as well as his mentioning of Iraq and Afghanistan, but he said he would have preferred that the Middle East -- and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, in particular -- be singled out for attention.

Echoes in the Media

¶5. (SBU) Tunisian media coverage of the inauguration has been similarly positive. The front pages of several dailies featured headlines highlighting President Ben Ali's message of congratulations to President Obama; others emphasized various aspects of the President's first speech, notably the pledge to rebuild relations with the Islamic world. One notable exception to this trend is the tabloid-style Arabic daily Ash-Shourouq, which featured the headline, "The World Without Bush -- Eight Years of Disaster Inside and Outside America" atop of a photograph of a shoe placed on top of a photo of President Bush.

President Ben Ali Sends Congratulations

¶6. (SBU) Local media also covered the congratulatory message President Ben Ali sent to President Obama. (NB: Presumably, this message has been conveyed via the Tunisian Embassy in

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Washington.) According to the press, Ben Ali said in his message that he was convinced that the long friendship and cooperation enjoyed by Tunisia and the United States will be reinforced to promote the countries' shared values. He also noted that he was sure that President Obama would spare no effort to bring about peace and stability in the Middle East, and to consolidate the foundations of justice, security, and peace in the world.

RSVP: Yes (Mostly)

¶7. (C) Breaking with GOT practice, several high-ranking GOT and ruling party officials attended the reception. VIPs included Oussama Romdhani, Director General of the Tunisian Agency for External Communications; Faouzi Aouam, Deputy Secretary General of the ruling Democratic Constitutional Rally (RCD) party; six Senators; and several Members of the Chamber of Advisors. In addition, several opposition political party leaders and former Ambassadors also attended, as well as numerous Embassy contacts from the fields of business, education, the arts, and civil society. A number of journalists were also present, including a camera crew from independent TV station Hannibal TV (Ref B). The semi-official Tunis-Afrique Press Agency was also present, as was the Director-General of Radio -- both entities have long declined Embassy invitations. Some invited guests declined to come, notably the leader of at-Tajdid, formerly the Communist Party; as well as the heads of two other opposition parties that have been vocal in their denunciation of US foreign policy in the region.

Comment: A Fresh Start

¶8. (C) Continuing Tunisian anger over the recent fighting in Gaza did not keep too many of our invitees away. Indeed, few of our guests engaged Embassy officers in conversation about Gaza, choosing instead to focus on the hope that they felt with the start of the Obama Presidency. Along these lines,

the Embassy will attempt to use the beginning of the new Administration to mark a fresh start with a GOT that has become increasingly inward-looking and resistant to US engagement. To this end, the Ambassador has already started a round of consultations with government leaders and opinion shapers to seek their views on bilateral relations and US foreign policy. There are some indications that the GOT is receptive. The fact that the inaugural event was so well attended, including by high-level officials, is certainly a good sign. They would not have attended had they not been given instructions to do so. Moreover, in comments made to EmbOffs, the RCD Deputy Secretary General suggested that his party is looking forward to re-engaging with the Embassy. This would be a welcome development. Even so, we have to keep in mind that 2009 is an election year for Tunisia. In this context, the GOT will remain averse to our pro-political reform message. End Comment.

Please visit Embassy Tunis' Classified Website at:
<http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/nea/tunis/index.cfm>
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